

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The “Bates House” Fire of 1906



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On Sunday the 16th of February 1906 flames engulfed the Mead Building that for years had been known as the “Bates House.”

About the Author



KENDALL WILD

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Kendall Wild retired in 1992 after 15 years as editor of the *Rutland Herald*. He had been employed at the *Herald* successively since 1952 as reporter, City Hall reporter, copy editor, bureau chief and managing editor. Kendall was born in Chicago, Illinois, and came to Vermont with his family in 1933. In 1942 the family moved to Rutland where Kendall graduated from Rutland High School in 1945.

He served in the Army of Occupation in Germany from 1945 to 1947. He then attended Harvard College from which he graduated in 1951. Kendall is a resident of Rutland City and a Life member of the Rutland Historical Society. Kendall has previously edited "Hospital Care in Rutland: the First Century" with Jean Ross; edited "John Pixley Clement: Personal Impressions of the Great War (1914-1919)" and authored "The Howe Scale Company: Its Time and Its People" for Society quarterlies.

Rutland Fires

Rutland has suffered from numerous fires throughout its history. As its village grew, the density of its commercial buildings created a greater fire threat than that posed by the individual farms in the town. Many of these buildings were unoccupied during the evening and this offered an additional risk of fire. In 1868 several fires that were clearly the work of arsonists struck Rutland. During that year there were over 30 fires. Structures consumed by these blazes included the County Courthouse, the Franklin House, the Town Hall and numerous downtown commercial buildings. However, the "Bates House" fire of 1906 claims the title as Rutland's greatest fire. Although no lives were lost, this fire destroyed and threatened to destroy more of the downtown commercial district than any fire previously or since. The Town House [Berwick] fire of 1973, which did cause loss of life, ranks as the second most disastrous of Rutland fires.

The “Bates House” Fire of 1906

By Kendall Wild

Early one midwinter Sabbath morning in 1906 the worst fire in the history of the city or town devastated a whole corner of Center Street and Merchants Row along with buildings up the north side of Center Street and north on the east side of Merchants Row. The flames extended back to the junction of Willow and Edson Streets, where the municipal parking garage is now located.

In the fallout from the blaze the city fire chief came under severe criticism and eventually resigned. A great number of people were left homeless and several major businesses were completely consumed.

John Abner Mead, head of the Howe Scale Company owned the multi-story structure at the northeast corner of Merchants Row and Center Street. For three decades previously it had been known as the Bates House although the ground floor had housed various businesses. In the apartments above there were also some commercial activities.

For years after the 1906 fire people referred to the fire as the “Bates House Fire.” News accounts of the time correctly called it the “Mead Building” but that term should not be confused with the five-story structure that stands at that location today and is called the “Mead Building.”

A number of major buildings in downtown Rutland were involved in the fire. The Ripley Block, north of the Mead Building, had businesses on the ground floor and also in the apartments on the floors above it. That structure, with its adjuncts, extended back to Willow Street and Edson Street.

East of the Mead Building on the north side of Center Street were a couple of small structures followed by the imposing building of the well-known Tuttle Printing Company.

The fire took place on 16 February 1906, a Sunday. It seemed to have started in the Ripley Block, spread back toward Willow Street and thus attacked the Tuttle Block from the rear. At the same time it spread to the Mead Building and before long the entire area, front and back, was in flames and collapsing.

The *Rutland Herald* building in those days was on Merchants Row, a few buildings south of Center Street, so the staff of the paper had what amounted to a front row seat for the fire. The *Herald's* managing editor, Mason A. Green, resided in an apartment on an upper

floor of the Ripley Block. After a narrow escape from the flames, he was able to marshal his forces for an extensive coverage of the whole event.

The *Herald* story of Monday, 17 February, was breathless with details from every angle. It opened with the following paragraph: "Like a storm swept sea, the heart of the business district of this city was devastated yesterday by a fire which, before it had been subdued, destroyed property worth nearly \$700,000. In its merciless pathway of destruction, seven of the largest mercantile structures were mown down like tinder amid the thunder of artillery in action. The roar and crackle of the flames was awe inspiring, impressive."

There were repeated comments from several sources that no lives were lost, despite the number of people who lost all their possessions and were left homeless.

It was uncertain just where the fire started in the Ripley Block. Some said the flames seemed to have begun at or near the furnace of that structure. Other witnesses said it seemed to have originated in the offices of a club called the Neshobe Club, in the Ripley Block.

"That a considerable loss of life did not occur is due in large measure to the work of Charles Quigley, the night operator at the New England Telephone Company exchange [on Merchants Row] who heard a woman scream from a window in the Ripley Block, where the fire started, then hurriedly advised her to warn the other tenants to leave the building, then summoned the city fire companies."

As the flames ate through the wall of the Ripley Building into the Bates House or Mead Building, where several apartments were located, "Arthur N. Brown and a *Herald* man ran through the corridors on the top floor to be sure that everyone had left the rooms. Several rooms were found locked, the doors smashed down and discovered to be empty. At the end of the last corridor a room was found locked, and no response being received after repeated knocking and shouting, the door was kicked down. Two sleepy frightened men sprang from their bed and looked out. The flames were only a few feet away and the men, who gave their names as Henry Trombley and Daniel Borden, were told the situation. They saved a few belongings and escaped. In another 10 minutes they would have been cut off."

It is surprising to see the enterprise of Mason Green's reporter at the scene for, amid all the turmoil, danger and excitement, he had the presence of mind to ask the names of the roomers he and Brown had awakened.

Miss Elizabeth Francisco, Miss Howard and Miss Christopher, who occupied rooms adjoining the Neshobe Club rooms in the Ripley Block, were awakened about 3 a.m. by the smell of smoke. On investigating,

they discovered fire issuing from the clubrooms. Becoming frightened, the women rushed to the roof, and Miss Francisco screamed loudly for help. Mr. Quigley heard the cries, and looking from his window saw the fire blazing from the windows of the Ripley Block. He immediately notified the fire department and the alarm was rung. The three young ladies were rescued from their perilous position in the Ripley block clad only in their night garments. They were taken to the telephone exchange where clothes were procured for them.

The front of the Ripley Block eventually crashed down onto Merchants Row, endangering firemen and spectators alike. The manager of the street railway stopped sending cars along that section of Merchants Row. Several men helped to clear away downed telephone and electric lines before they could injure people, who by this time had gathered in such numbers that the police had to rope off the streets at the intersection of Center Street and Merchants Row.

In response to a telegraph appeal, firefighters from Whitehall, New York, put two fire engines on flatbed cars of the Delaware and Hudson Railway and brought them to Rutland where they went into service in such a manner that they attracted favorable comments in contrast to the opinions expressed about the Rutland department.

As the front of the Ripley Block crashed down onto Merchants Row, the *Herald* noted that by this time the fire had spread to the Combination Cash Store on the north side of the Ripley Block. Meanwhile the Mead building to the south "was now a vast furnace, forks of fire darting up a hundred feet and across the roof and through the walls and floors. The big tower at the end smoked, crackled, and burst into flames." Flames leapt "through the windows of the upper floor, twisted around the balconies and forced their way down until the structure was but a shell."

Fortunately there was little wind. Nevertheless the fire worked its way east along the north side of Center Street and back toward Willow and Edson Streets.

"With a crash which could easily have been heard for half a mile the west wall of the Tuttle Company building in the rear of Center Street fell, and simultaneously the Combination Cash Store building on Willow Street became a seething mass of flames." Flames from the second story of the Combination Cash Store attacked the rear of the Tuttle Building on Center Street. The situation soon became a fire-trap with which the fire department was unable to cope.

The fire department then concentrated its efforts on trying to prevent the flames from spreading east up Willow Street. "The firemen were greatly handicapped, having but one line of hose on that side. Alderman James W. Creed was in charge and stationed the men in

the alley between the Combination Cash Store and W. L. Barker's stable. The firemen worked desperately to check the progress of the flames, but to no avail."

Fire engines of this era were called "steamers" as their pumping action was operated by steam power. Until the steamer's fire had gotten up steam, no water could be forced into the hose.



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(l) R.G. Waterman Store at 27 Merchants Row and (r) Combination Cash Store at 29 Merchants Row just north of the Ripley Block.



The additional building of the Combination Cash Store on Willow and Edson Streets became totally engulfed with flames.



Flames sweeping in from the west and the north turned the Tuttle Block on Center Street into ruins. The water applied to the buildings on Center Street seemed futile as witnessed by the debris in the street.

Mason Green whose apartment was in the Ripley Block, had escaped due to the timely warning by Arthur Brown and a Rutland police officer, Oren Packard. "The flames had nearly cut off the stairs leading from his room to the street. The smoke was so thick that he was dazed. He was partially dressed. He seized one of three manuscripts of books which he had planned to publish, and took it with him when he left the burning building. He lost his library of 500 volumes, a system of clippings filed in boxes as well as a number of paintings and other works of art."

Delay by the firefighters seemed to have caused the fire to become so dangerous. "At first, when confined to the Ripley building on Merchants Row, the infant monster seemed puny, even insignificant. The use of hand chemicals would have sufficed. There was not a breath of air stirring, but the delay of the department in bringing hose and water into action permitted the fatality of time."

"Little by little the elements gathered force and gained in magnitude. Suddenly the entire front of the Ripley building was enveloped with a seething mass of waving, jumping billows, that burst forth into the air and illuminated the sky. At first the firemen were sanguine, then dubious and later exasperated."

Until the arrival of the Whitehall fire fighters the entire heart of the business district "along Merchants Row and Center Street was in imminent danger of utter devastation as a result of the incapacity of the Rutland Fire Department. The disconcerted effort to direct several streams of water upon the flames, and the farcical nature of this attempt, with its heart-rending result, was sufficient to bring tears to the eyes of strong men. No mortal could prophesy the horror and extensiveness of this blackened area of ruins had a wind risen to fan the flames. Unquestionably the city would have been a barren waste."

"Time after time the steamer ceased operations and the streams playing upon the elements resembled the puny shadows of garden hose in the hands of children. 'No water,' was one excuse. 'A little breakdown,' was another. 'Waiting for further orders,' said one of the men in charge of machinery."

"Representative businessmen, who watched their establishments and the toil of years shrink away like the wasted body in the throes of deadly fever, paced up and down to restrain their tongues. Men who have in the years of their lives witnessed hundreds of conflagrations, pronounced this the most miserable and farcical exhibition of fire fighting they had ever witnessed. Everything was chaos."

Some bystanders claimed that the hydrants were frozen and blamed the firemen for not checking the working order of the hy-

drants. But others said that the city water department had jurisdiction over the condition of the hydrants. That caused Water Superintendent Arthur C. Grover to announce that his people had checked all the hydrants only a couple of days before the weekend of the fire and found them in good shape.

Fire Chief George W. Dunton, who was said to be ailing, gave an interview to a reporter on Sunday evening. He issued a statement denying that the hydrants were frozen. He said, "There was not one hydrant frozen up. I can get four men who will come forward and swear that my statement is true. The delay was in getting the alarm at the house. We responded with apparatus just as quickly as we got the alarm and made a quick run to the fire. I am proud of the work of my department."

Mayor J. Forrest Manning, however, announced he would undertake an immediate and thorough investigation. Mayor Manning also called for a fund to help the people who had lost their possessions. He himself put up \$50 toward that fund. In terms of today's money, that would be the equivalent of upwards of \$700 or \$800.

There were numerous sidelights to the conflagration. "George E. Carpenter, who resides at the corner of East and Terill Streets, was seized with an epileptic fit yesterday afternoon in front of the depot. Mr. Carpenter was removed to the waiting room and Dr. Heidel summoned. The man was sent to his home in a carriage. The fit, it is thought, was the result of excitement attending the fire."

Since the beginning of February snow had been plentiful. "The fact that buildings all over the city are covered with snow doubtlessly saved many fires yesterday, as the burning embers were scattered over a radius of more than a mile. Several people, while standing in front of Dr. S.W. Hammond's house on Cottage Street, stated that a large piece of tin, smoking hot, lodged in a tree nearby. Many other large pieces of burning material lodged on housetops in various parts of the city, but the snow on the roofs quenched whatever fire existed."

The *Herald* gave itself a pat on the back for having issued an "extra" on the afternoon of the fire. "In less than two hours after the walls of the ruined blocks had fallen, people were reading five solid columns of the great disaster in the *Herald*. The presses which printed the extra edition were set in motion at 2:25 o'clock and 10 minutes later the newsboys were reaping in the pennies on the streets. That the enterprise of the *Herald* was fully appreciated by the citizens was easily shown by the rapid manner in which thousands of copies of the paper sold."

The fire that began early Sunday morning lasted until early afternoon. Although church bells could be heard ringing throughout the morning, "men and women heeded not the call nor, in their excitement, gave more than a fleeting thought to the religious significance."

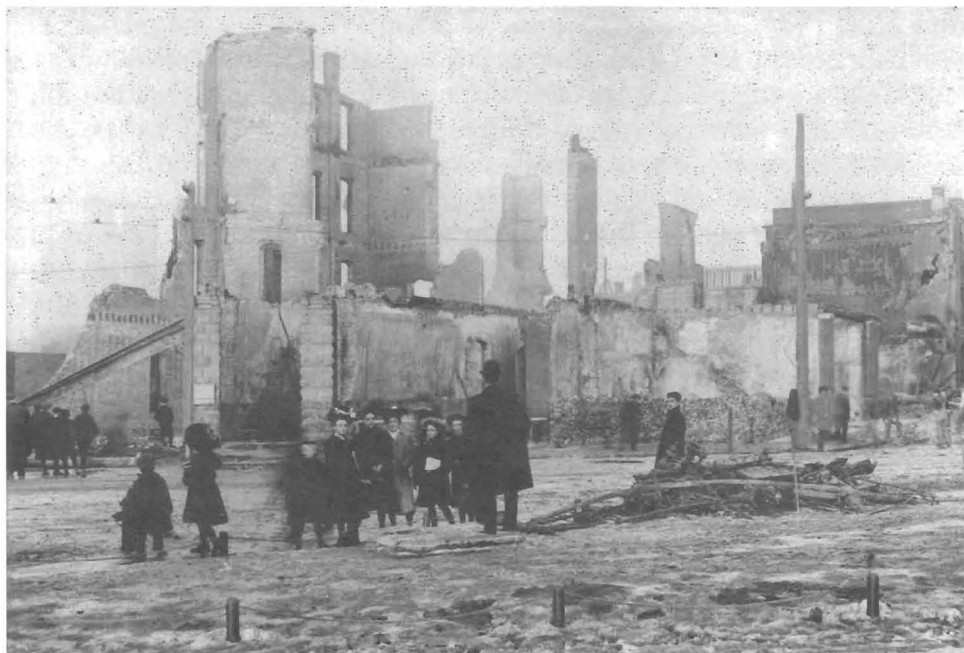
The *Herald* reported the names of the owners who lost property and estimates of the cost of the damages. R.G. Waterman who sold wallpapers and crockery at 27 Merchants Row had a loss of \$10,000 caused principally by water and smoke damage on his stock. One of the heaviest losers was the Combination Cash Store, purveyors of wholesale and retail general merchandise at 29 Merchants Row. Their block at the corner of Willow and Edson Streets, occupied as a warehouse, was a total loss. Their entire stock was probably a total loss. "Figures on the street say \$100,000 will not cover stock and buildings." The block facing Merchants Row that was occupied by R.G. Waterman and the Combination Cash Store is the property of Miss Mary E. Cramton, C.S. Norton and W.W. Nichols. That portion occupied by the Cash Combination Store is in ruins.

John J. Kissane and Company and Hopkins and Howley occupied the Ripley Block at 31 and 33 Merchants Row. Kissane sold dry goods and Hopkins and Howley sold clothing and men's furnishings. Their loss was estimated at \$100,000. Other floors were occupied by J.C. Jones, law offices, Edgar B. Moore, health officer, the Neshobe Club, and Mason A. Green, editor of the *Herald* who lost a valuable library, and Miss Farr, who cared for the building. G.N. Stevens who leased two floors of the Ripley building had a loss estimated at \$2,000. Losses sustained by the occupants of the upper floors of the Ripley building, that included personal effects and books, were at least \$20,000.

Dr. John A. Mead was owner of the Mead Building that fronted on Merchants Row and Center Street. This building was the largest mercantile structure in the city. It was worth \$150,000 but Mead had no insurance on it. Some may wonder why such a prominent business and industrial figure did not insure his building. But the Howe Scale Company was his major business and as owner of other property he undoubtedly figured those who rented from him would insure their own goods. Wilson and Root who sold clothing and men's furnishings at 35 Merchant's Row had a loss of between \$30,000 and \$40,000. Queiroli and Company, proprietors of the Boston Candy Kitchen at 37 Merchants Row had a total loss of stock and fixtures that was estimated at \$5,000. The Marble Savings Bank lost fixtures and furniture. No estimate of value was available. The safe was fireproof and it is thought that the deposits were not damaged.



The ruins of the Bates House Fire on the 16th of February 1906. The Clement Bank is in the distance on the west side of Merchants Row.



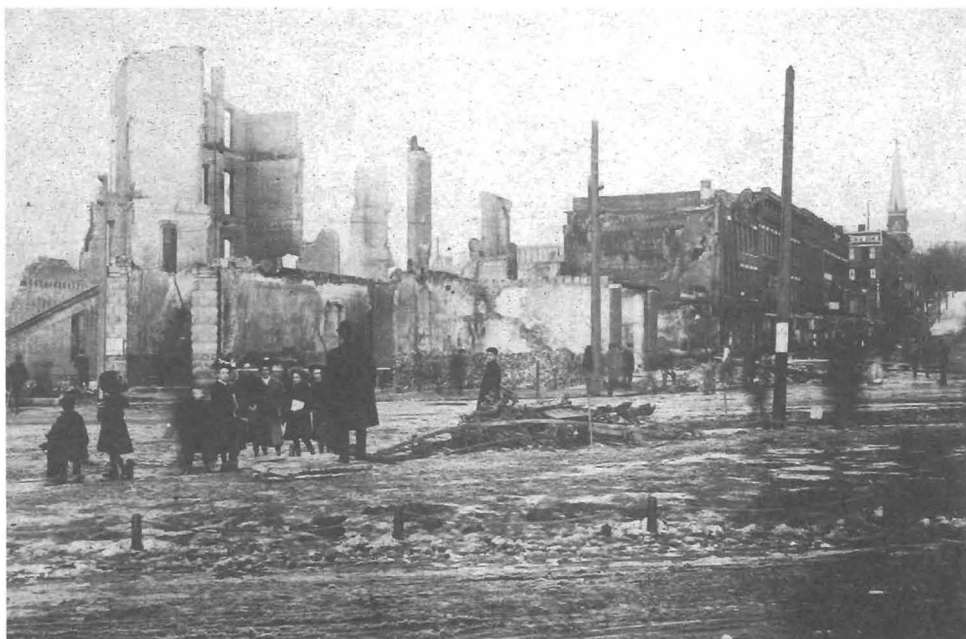
The ruins of the Bates House Fire are seen looking northeasterly from the Depot Park.



The remains of the Hopkins and Howley Store that was on the east side of Merchants Row stand in silent testimony to the fire's power.



Crowds of people were spectators both during the fire and after the conflagration was finally subdued. Note the steamer at the left.



This view from the intersection of Center Street and Merchants Row shows the extent of the fire damage on Center Street.

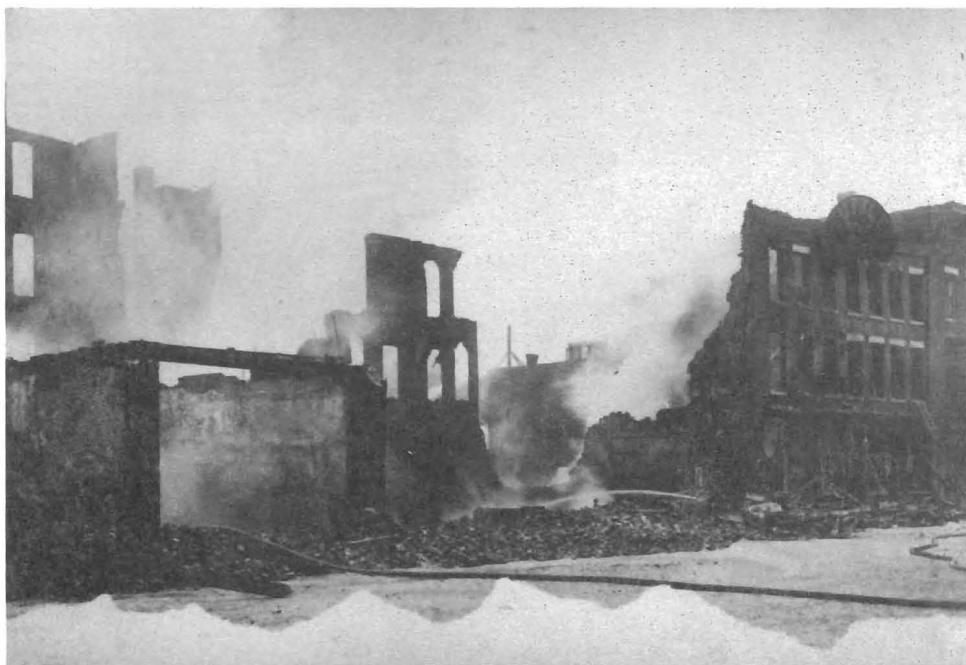
The YMCA, located in the Mead building, had losses of probably \$5,000. Louis Miner at the corner of Merchants Row and Center Street had a total loss of stock estimated at \$15,000. The 20 or more families that occupied the Mead building lost an estimated \$5,000.

On Center Street, A.H. Abraham, druggist and tobacconist at number three had a loss estimated at \$25,000 to \$30,000. David B. Twigg and Company who sold clothing and men's furnishings at 5 Center Street had a loss estimated at \$5,000. Michael Dugan, saloonkeeper at 7 Center Street, lost probably \$10,000 in stock for which he had no insurance. T.B. Halpin, who had a barbershop over Michael Dugan's saloon, had a loss of about \$200 that was covered by insurance. Gardner Baker, who owned the block at 7 Center Street, had a loss to the building of about \$12,000. F.L. Blake, photographer at 7 ° Center Street lost \$1,000.

Louis Abraham, cigar and tobacco dealer at 9 Center Street had a loss that may reach \$10,000. The Tuttle Company lost stock and two blocks at 11 and 13 Center Street whose value was estimated at \$130,000. Fred Fenn in the Fenn Block at 15 Center Street had a loss not exceeding \$1,000, principally from water and smoke damage. All other minor losses not mentioned above, sustained by occupants of offices and apartments, were estimated at \$10,000.

The Tuttle Company announced almost at once that it would move into temporary quarters after ordering new equipment and use that location until it could rebuild on its own property. Dugan, the saloonkeeper, said he would apply for a license to open at a new location elsewhere in the city. The Combination Cash Store issued a list of places in the city where the owners had made arrangements to take orders for foodstuffs and to provide goods that had been on order but which had not yet arrived. For others, recovery would be slower.

Looking at that section of downtown today, it is hard to imagine the scene of devastation that presented itself on the morning of Sunday, 16 February 1906.



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This view on Center Street provides a more detailed visual account of the damage inflicted on Center Street by the Bates House fire.

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An aerial view of the smoldering ruins of the Bates House Fire dramatically summarizes the events of that fateful day.